

# Mediterranean Lingua Franca

The **Mediterranean Lingua Franca**, or **Sabir**, was a [contact language](#),<sup>[1]</sup> or languages, that were used as a [lingua franca](#) in the [Mediterranean Basin](#) from the 11th to the 19th centuries.<sup>[2]</sup> [April McMahon](#) describes Sabir as a "fifteenth century proto-pidgin" and "a relic of the original Lingua Franca, a medieval language used by Mediterranean traders and by the Crusaders."<sup>[3]</sup> [Operstein](#) and [McMahon](#) categorize Sabir and "Lingua Franca" as separate but related languages.<sup>[1][3]</sup>



Map of Europe and the Mediterranean from the [Catalan Atlas](#) of 1375

## Etymology

*Lingua franca* meant literally "[Frankish language](#)" in [Late Latin](#), and it originally referred specifically to the language that was used around the [Eastern Mediterranean Sea](#) as the main [language of commerce](#).<sup>[4]</sup> However, the term "Franks" was actually applied to [all Western Europeans](#) during the late [Byzantine Period](#).<sup>[5][6]</sup> Later, the meaning of *lingua franca* expanded to mean any [bridge language](#). Its other name in the Mediterranean area was *Sabir*, a term cognate of *saber* ("to know") in most Iberian languages and of Italian and Latin *sapere* and French *savoir*.

## Origins

Based mostly on Northern Italy's languages (mainly [Venetian](#) and [Genoese](#)) and secondarily on [Occitano-Romance languages](#) ([Catalan](#) and [Occitan](#)) in the western Mediterranean

Mediterranean Lingua Franca	
<i>sabir</i>	
Region	Mediterranean Basin (esp. <a href="#">Morocco</a> , <a href="#">Algeria</a> , <a href="#">Tunisia</a> , <a href="#">Libya</a> , <a href="#">Lebanon</a> , <a href="#">Greece</a> , <a href="#">Cyprus</a> )
Extinct	19th century
Language family	primarily Romance-based <a href="#">pidgin</a> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Mediterranean Lingua Franca</b></li></ul>
Official status	
Official language in	<i>none</i>
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	<span>pml</span>
Linguist List	<span>pml.html (http://web.archive.org/web/202001010101/http://multitree.org/codes/pml.html)</span>
Glottolog	<span>ling1242 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/ling1242)</span>
Linguasphere	<span>51-AAB-c</span>

area at first, Lingua Franca later came to have more [Spanish](#) and [Portuguese](#) elements, especially on the [Barbary Coast](#) (now referred to as the [Maghreb](#)). Lingua Franca also borrowed from [Berber](#), [Turkish](#), [French](#), [Greek](#) and [Arabic](#).

The grammar of the language used aspects from many of its [lexifiers](#). The infinitive was used for all verb forms and the lexicon was primarily [Italo-Romance](#), with a Spanish interface. As in Arabic, [vowel space](#) was reduced, and Venetian influences can be seen in the dropping of certain vowels and intervocalic stops.

## History

This mixed language was used widely for commerce and diplomacy and was also current among slaves of the [bagnio](#), [Barbary pirates](#) and European renegades in precolonial [Algiers](#). Historically, the first to use it were the [Genoese and Venetian trading colonies](#) in the eastern Mediterranean after the year 1000.

As the use of Lingua Franca spread in the Mediterranean, dialectal fragmentation emerged, the main difference being more use of Italian and Provençal vocabulary in the Middle East, while Ibero-Romance lexical material dominated in the Maghreb. After France became the dominant power in the latter area in the 19th century, Algerian Lingua Franca was heavily gallicised (to the extent that locals are reported having believed that they spoke French when conversing in Lingua Franca with the Frenchmen, who in turn thought they were speaking Arabic), and this version of the language was spoken into the nineteen hundreds.... Algerian French was indeed a dialect of French, although Lingua Franca certainly had had an influence on it.... Lingua Franca also seems to have affected other languages. [Eritrean Pidgin Italian](#), for instance, displayed some remarkable similarities with it, in particular the use of Italian participles as past or perfective markers. It seems reasonable to assume that these similarities have been transmitted through Italian foreigner talk stereotypes.<sup>[7]</sup>

The similarities contribute to discussions of the classification of Lingua Franca as a language. Although its official classification is that of a pidgin, some scholars adamantly oppose that classification and believe it would be better viewed as an [interlanguage](#) of Italian.

[Hugo Schuchardt](#) (1842–1927) was the first scholar to investigate the Lingua Franca systematically. According to the [monogenetic theory of the origin of pidgins](#) that he developed, Lingua Franca was known by Mediterranean sailors including the Portuguese. When the [Portuguese started exploring](#) the seas of Africa, America, Asia and Oceania, they tried to communicate with the natives by mixing a [Portuguese](#)-influenced version of Lingua Franca with the local languages. When English or French ships came to compete with the Portuguese, the

crews tried to learn the "broken Portuguese". A process of [relexification](#) caused the Lingua Franca and Portuguese [lexicon](#) to be substituted by the languages of the peoples in contact.

The theory is one way of explaining the similarities between most of the European-based pidgins and [creole languages](#), such as [Tok Pisin](#), [Papiamentu](#), [Sranan Tongo](#), [Krio](#) and [Chinese Pidgin English](#). Those languages use forms similar to or derived from *sabir* for 'to know' and *piquenho* for "children".

Lingua Franca left traces in present Algerian slang and [Polari](#). There are traces even in geographical names, such as [Cape Guardafui](#), which literally means "Cape Look and Escape" in Lingua Franca and ancient Italian.

## Debate

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Many aspects of Lingua Franca are still largely up for debate and different scholars have different opinions. That is because Lingua Franca was a primarily oral language, with some accounts of it and examples in literature, but very little by way of real examples of the language in use. That may also reflect the language's unfixed and changing nature.

Debated aspects are the language's classification and the origin of the term "lingua franca".

Although the language is officially classified as a pidgin, some scholars argue that to be inaccurate and pointing instead toward an interlanguage of Italian or a [koiné language](#).

Alternate origins for the term lingua franca include its translation as "free language", perhaps referring to free trade, or a translation from Arabic meaning "Latin language" or "trade language". It has also been translated to mean "Venetian" or "western language" or simply to mean "French language".<sup>[8]</sup>

## See also

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- [African Romance](#)
- [Mozarabic language](#)
- [Lingua Franca Nova](#)

## Notes

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- Operstein, Natalie. "[The syntactic structures of Lingua Franca in the Dictionnaire de la langue franque](https://www.italian-journal-linguistics.com/app/uploads/2021/05/4_Operstein.pdf)" (https://www.italian-journal-linguistics.com/app/uploads/2021/05/4\_Operstein.pdf) (PDF). Retrieved 29 May 2023. "Although written representations of, and/or extra-linguistic comments on, LF come from more than one period and more than one area of the Mediterranean, the principal documentation of

this contact language is circumscribed by the area of the Maghreb in the period between the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century (Cifoletti 1989, 2004; Camus Bergareche 1993; Arends 1998; Couto 2002)"

2. Bruni, Francesco. "Storia della Lingua Italiana: Gli scambi linguistici nel Mediterraneo e la lingua franca" ([https://web.archive.org/web/20090328135757/http://www.italica.rai.it/principali/lingua/bruni/lezioni/f\\_III5.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20090328135757/http://www.italica.rai.it/principali/lingua/bruni/lezioni/f_III5.htm)) [History of the Italian Language: Linguistic exchanges in the Mediterranean and the lingua franca] (in Italian). Archived from [the original](http://www.italica.rai.it/principali/lingua/bruni/lezioni/f_III5.htm) ([http://www.italica.rai.it/principali/lingua/bruni/lezioni/f\\_III5.htm](http://www.italica.rai.it/principali/lingua/bruni/lezioni/f_III5.htm)) on 28 March 2009. Retrieved 28 March 2009.
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## External links

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- [Dictionnaire de la Langue Franque ou Petit Mauresque](#) (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6290361w>) , 1830. (In French)
  - [A Glossary of Lingua Franca](#) (<https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/8178/go.html>) , fifth edition, 2005, *Alan D. Corré*. It includes articles about the language from various authors and sample texts.
  - [Tales in Sabir from Algeria](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20090223181455/http://www.alger-roi.net/Alger/sabir/sabir.htm>)
  - [Lingua franca in the Mediterranean](#) (Google book) (<https://books.google.com/books?id=M9O68yvLbQQC&pg=PA137>)